



Hiring an innovative workforce: A necessary yet uniquely challenging endeavor

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ABSTRACT

To increase innovative performance in work settings, most scholars agree that organizations need both an environment that is supportive of creativity as well as employees with high levels of creative potential. Substantial research effort has been aimed at understanding work contexts that facilitate creative thinking, yet less is known regarding how to most effectively recruit and hire creative talent. To fill this knowledge gap and guide future research efforts, we discuss the KSAOs most predictive of creative potential as well as the means and methods for assessing this potential. In addition, we explore the challenges to quantifying successful innovation, proposing that creative achievement represents a unique and specialized form of organizational performance. Supplementing this discussion we provide recommendations for obtaining high-quality, substantive criterion data. We conclude with a brief discussion on recruitment and long-term selection strategies for innovation.

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1. Introduction

“The first step in winning the future is encouraging American innovation. None of us can predict with certainty what the next big industry will be or where the new jobs will come from. Thirty years ago, we couldn’t know that something called the Internet would lead to an economic revolution. What we can do – what America does better than anyone else – is spark the creativity and imagination of our people. We’re the nation that put cars in driveways and computers in offices; the nation of Edison and the Wright brothers; of Google and Facebook. In America, innovation doesn’t just change our lives. It is how we make our living.” President Barack Obama

The quote above, delivered by President Obama in his 2011 State of the Union address is just one of many recent calls to arms by politicians and business leaders alike for innovation to be placed at the top of our collective to-do list. Despite the recent increase in the pace of the “need for innovation” drum beat in public discourse, organizations have been placing an increased premium on innovation for many years. This trend is not surprising given that innovation, defined by most creativity scholars as the successful implementation of ideas that are both novel and useful (Amabile, 1983; Mumford & Gustafson, 1988), provides a competitive advantage to those businesses that are able to consistently generate and implement new products and processes (Dess & Pickens, 2000; Janssen, van de Vliert, & West, 2004; Kao, 2007). In fact, a 2011 survey of 1000 business executives from 12 countries commissioned by General Electric and conducted independently by StrategyOne underscores the pressing need for organizations to invest in innovation. A remarkable majority of the senior executives surveyed (over 88% in each instance) believed that

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innovation was critical to creating a more competitive economy, developing green initiatives, and, most important in the present economy, creating new jobs (GE Global Innovation Barometer, 2011). Additionally, a recent employment survey conducted by the National Science Foundation found that companies that conducted or provided funding for research and development related work had over 7% of their workforce devoted specifically to R&D activities (Moris & Kannankutty, 2010).

With innovation emerging as a key priority for a significant portion of the workforce, it becomes imperative that organizations be adequately prepared to recruit, select, and retain individuals capable of undertaking the difficult work of innovation. More generally, the growing emphasis on enhancing innovation has led to the emergence of a fundamental and persistent question: How do organizations most effectively develop and pursue a strategy for creative performance? The bulk of the research on creative thinking and innovation suggests that the answer will be found via the interactionist model of innovation, where creative performance is theorized to emerge from the interplay between the context and the individual (Amabile, 1996; Mumford & Gustafson, 1988; Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Woodman, Sawyer, & Griffin, 1993; Woodman, Schoenfeldt & Reynolds, 1989). While organizations continue to make strides in demonstrating their prioritization of innovation and in promoting environments that support it, the other component of the interactionist perspective is often more difficult to implement – the human resources practices that aim to build a creative workforce.

The research on innovation follows a similar pattern as the applied discussion above. For instance, a rich body of research has emerged about work environments that support and enhance innovation (e.g., Amabile, 1983, 1988, 1996; Andrews & Farris, 1972; Ekvall, 1996; Knapp, 1963; Woodman et al., 1993). In fact, a recent meta-analysis on creative climate revealed that there were over 45 differing taxonomies used to classify creative context (Hunter et al., 2007). However, less research effort has been aimed at understanding how to best supply the talent for innovative endeavors. Given that employee creative potential stands as a necessary pre-condition for innovation in organizations (Mumford, 2000), there appears to be a sizable knowledge gap in how to most effectively pursue and execute a strategy for innovation. In an effort to fill this gap, three primary issues are addressed in the present effort. First, we outline the building blocks of any successful HR practice – the key knowledge, skills, abilities, and “other” (KSAO) attributes most predictive of creativity and innovation. In this discussion, we offer some guidance as to which KSAOs may be most useful for predicting innovative outcomes. Supplementing this discussion we consider other critical elements of the Human Resources process, including differing selection and assessment approaches that may be used in capturing creative and innovative potential, means for acquiring criterion data necessary for performance appraisals and associated challenges in assessing creative performance, recommendations on effective recruitment of creative talent, and long-term selection strategies for building and sustaining an innovative workforce.

2. Selecting for innovation: identifying a predictor set

Creative performance is a complex, dynamic, multi-faceted phenomenon (Barron & Harrington, 1981; Mumford & Gustafson, 1988). Not surprisingly, then, the qualities necessary for generating and implementing novel ideas are equally complex, dynamic, and multi-faceted. Although much remains to be learned about individual characteristics necessary for innovation, research from organizational, cognitive, social, and developmental psychology has provided us with a reasonable jumping off point to think about the qualities most likely to be useful in a selection context. Consistent with most approaches to hiring, we present the knowledge, skills, abilities, and “other” (KSAO) characteristics predictive of creative performance.

Before turning to a discussion of the specific KSAOs theorized to predict innovation, it would appear useful to briefly discuss what roles, from a conceptual standpoint, KSAOs play in driving innovative output. Recall that innovation represents the *instantiation* of creative ideas with those ideas having their initial generative roots in creative employees. Put another way, creative potential is a necessary precondition for innovative output – a relationship depicted in Fig. 1. Two points are particularly noteworthy with regard to the conceptual model presented. First, creative potential is not comprised of a single construct, measure, or scale. Rather, it is the aggregate of KSAOs that represent whether an individual possesses creative potential. Certainly some aspects are weighted more heavily in this prediction – a point addressed later in our discussion – yet we must bear in mind that creativity is a complex phenomenon, driven by multiple attributes and qualities. The second point worthy of note is that creative potential stands only as a necessary but not sufficient condition for innovative output. Consistent with interactionist perspectives (Woodman et al., 1993), creative potential will lead to innovative output under conditions supportive of creative thinking. Thus, while the present effort focuses on the initial drivers of innovative output (i.e., creative talent), organizations seeking to enhance creative performance must also consider the role of context in appropriately maximizing their creative talent (see Mumford & Hunter, 2005; Shalley & Gilson, 2004 for a discussion). With this conceptual framework in mind, we turn our attention to a discussion on the KSAOs comprising creative potential. We begin with the building blocks of creative thinking: knowledge.

2.1. Knowledge

2.1.1. Domain specific expertise

One of the core components of creative idea generation is information (Ericsson & Charness, 1994; Weisburg, 1999). That is, creative idea generation may be viewed as the combination of two or more concepts that were previously viewed as unrelated. To combine (at least) two concepts, however, an individual must have cognitive access to such concepts (Hunter et al., 2008). Such access is contingent upon a well-organized mental framework – a framework most aptly described as expertise (Weisburg,

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